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“I’d Do It Again”

Talking Afghanistan with Zbigniew Brzezinski

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Adam Garfinkle recently spoke with former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski about the history of America’s involvement in Afghanistan, and the uses and abuses of the intelligence craft.

AI: I have just three specific and related questions for you, Zbig. The first is about Afghanistan, then and now, and the supposed lingering burdens of certain key decisions made when you were National Security Advisor to President Carter. The second is about how, as you’ve put it many times, we need to understand complex parts of the world for what they are, rather than impose our own preconceptions on them. And the third concerns how well the intelligence community serves us in this regard.

Zbigniew Brzezinski: OK, sounds like fun.

AI: Let’s start by recalling a question another magazine editor posed to you some weeks ago. He suggested that U.S. policy in aiding the *mujaheddin* after the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had created the Taliban, al-Qaeda and all the trouble we’ve experienced from both. So wasn’t it, in retrospect, a bad idea?

You answered that this was “a crazy question.” It has at any rate become a common one. I’ve noticed over several years now how it has become a common journalistic trope that U.S. support for the Afghan *mujaheddin*, provided through the Pakistani ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence], has backfired badly on us—that it was all a terrible mistake. Of course, many blame you for it more than they blame President Carter or anyone else. How did that decision look in 1979 and 1980 to you and your colleagues when you made it? Have you ever since regretted it?

ZB: In 1979 and 1980, when the decision was made, we were dealing with a powerful

Soviet Union that was on a roll. The Soviet Union maintained terrorist training camps all over their country. If the Soviet Union had prevailed then, I can only imagine what the world would have been like subsequently. I am not at all regretful that the Soviet Union collapsed, and one of the reasons it collapsed was because of what we did in Afghanistan. I would not hesitate to do it again.

But there's something else to be said apropos of the current situation. A public opinion poll recently appeared in the *Economist* which showed that 80 percent of the people in Iraq would like our troops to leave, but 70 percent of the people in Afghanistan want our troops to stay despite the growing difficulties. That should focus our attention on an important point: namely, that we wouldn't have that support today in Afghanistan if we hadn't done what we did beginning in the Carter Administration. The support of the majority of the Afghan people greatly minimizes the threat from Islamist extremists confronting us today. Moreover, the al-Qaeda phenomenon has been much more a Middle Eastern phenomenon than an Afghan one. There are hardly any Afghans among the terrorists responsible for 9/11 and other attacks in Europe and elsewhere. Let me add, however, an additional point: My great fear is that if we over-militarize our current efforts in Afghanistan, we will gradually turn the Afghans against us. They do not care for foreigners with guns in their country.

AI: Also striking about the "blowback" argument is that in 1979, or in 1982, or even in 1989 when the Red Army left the country, the chain of events that led to al-Qaeda's move into Afghanistan in 1996 hadn't even happened yet. And it couldn't reasonably have been foreseen. So the underlying assumption of the "blowback" argument is that it's possible for U.S. decision-makers to foresee all the lateral effects of the policy when it is made, three, eight or ten years into the future.

ZB: People who phrase it that way have no sense of historical developments. The fact of the matter is that the Taliban came into the region after ten years of sustained Soviet pulverization of Afghan society, and after at least half a decade of American indifference to Afghanistan after the Soviets left. That's the backdrop against which to view the Taliban's rise.

AI: And the camps in Peshawar had their effect over time—

ZB: That's right. The arrival of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan took place, as you say, in the second half of the 1990s, 16 years after we initially decided to prevent the Soviets from prevailing in Afghanistan. So it is a totally ahistorical argument which seems to be premised on the notion, maybe implicitly, that it would be better if the Soviet Union still existed. That way we would not be waging "World War IV", as some of the crazies

among the neocons call it, against Islamofascism.

AI: It seems to me that the real animus behind the “blowback” argument is not that its proponents want the Soviet Union to continue to exist, but that everything that goes wrong in the world is somehow the fault of the U.S. government, as manifested in some antecedent decision.

ZB: Right, and that everything should again be black and white. It’s complicated to think that some Muslims, like the majority of Afghans, work with America against other Muslims. It would be so much simpler if we were waging war against some sort of united Islamic, Muslim fascist enemy, but it’s a mistake to think that, whether that thought comes from the Left or the Right.

AI: It’s certainly clear to anyone who’s been paying attention that, as you well know, the forces that issued forth from the *mujaheddin* experience included not just Muslims who don’t like us, but also the several constituents of the Northern Alliance, who were also *mujaheddin* but were on our side during the war. This is a complicated part of the world. It isn’t easily divisible into good guys and bad guys. There aren’t just two sides but often three or four sides. Yet Americans seem to approach all these subjects with what S.I. Hayakawa once called the “two-value orientation.” Are we so Manichaeian of mind that we can’t understand a conflict with more than two sides?

ZB: I think you’re putting your finger on a major weakness of contemporary America. The weakness is that we’re more democratic than we’ve ever been before, in the sense that popular pressures translate into policy pressures very quickly. And we’re probably as ignorant as ever about the rest of the world, because everybody now lives in a kind of simplistic, trivialized virtual reality in which fact and fiction, impressions and impulses, are mixed up in an incoherent fashion. The public really has no grasp of complexities, no sense of intellectual refinement in judging them, and our political leaders have become increasingly demagogic. The way George W. Bush campaigned for the war in Iraq, with reference to fictitious WMDs, and with sweeping, simplistic, black-and-white generalizations about freedom and tyranny, is a case in point. But he was responding to our increasingly imbecilized societal condition. This is very troublesome. I think the degeneration of the newspapers as a primary source of information, the collapse of serious television news programs, and the emergence of this kind of instant communion between reality and virtual reality creates a collective state of mind that is not derived from rational analysis.

AI: One last question: We do have people in our intelligence community who understand critical non-Western parts of the world. Yet there has been a lot of variation among administrations as to how and when these experts are tapped. What

has happened to the intelligence process over the past twenty or thirty years, and why?

ZB: I look at it this way: American intelligence has gone through three sweeping phases since America became actively involved in the world. The first phase was essentially that of the OSS [Office of Strategic Services] in the latter phase of World War II and shortly thereafter. The OSS was a kind of quasi-intelligence organization and quasi-special forces outfit all rolled into one. It was gung ho, sometimes imaginative, sometimes reckless, and sometimes produced terrible setbacks—particularly the Albanian expedition during the early Cold War, which was actually run by the Soviets without the OSS knowing it. But it was a heroic and generally creative period.

Then came the protracted period of competition with the Soviets, during which the CIA took shape and evolved from the heroic special-operations model into a serious, highly technologically and scientifically oriented enterprise. In this phase we focused heavily on deciphering and, in some respects, penetrating the Soviet efforts to obtain the same strategic capabilities that we had developed somewhat ahead of them. Of course, they eventually caught up with us, but the greatest advantage of this phase from an intelligence perspective was that the Soviets tended to do what we were doing and for the most part what we had already done. We had truly technologically and scientifically creative people in the intelligence area, and as a consequence we could decipher Soviet capabilities (though without necessarily being able to decipher Soviet intentions) to an unprecedented degree. Many people still do not fully appreciate the incredible advantages our position and expertise gave us. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the threat to the United States became more diversified, and related to less tangible and less rational populist, ethnic and religious dynamics. In this third phase, understanding the intellect, penetrating the culture, and relating on a human basis to often non-Western decision-makers has become much more important. In this phase, I think we have been a total flop. We misunderstood what was happening in Iran early on in the 1970s; we failed to grasp the rise of radical populism later on; and most recently, the advent of Islamist terrorism hit us almost completely unawares. The debacle in Iraq with intelligence was just the culmination of this inadequacy. Even the fairly recent seeming reversal of the National Intelligence Estimate on Iran—at least in the unclassified version—testifies to the fundamental, politically damaging lack of credibility of our intelligence establishment today. While I am prepared to believe that the most recent update on Iran is probably more accurate than the earlier one, one could also make a plausible case for the opposite being true.

AI: Here's another example of your point: One outcome of the Iraq war, so far

anyway, has been a significant exacerbation of the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry throughout the Muslim world. When I was in government, I asked several people in a position to know if anyone had studied this issue before the war as a possible concern. The answer I got was of the yes-and-no variety. Yes, there were people in the intelligence community who had flagged this as an issue, but no, no senior decision-maker had evinced the slightest curiosity about it. Therefore, since nobody asked our experts to study the issue, it was never evaluated in-depth. That's alarming.

ZB: It is, yes, and it all pertains to public statements about conditions in the Persian Gulf in the phase preceding the decision to go into Iraq. The President, the Vice President, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense rarely referred to the cleavage between the Sunnis and the Shi'a or the potential implications of these cleavages. I strongly suspect that when the President announced the decision to go into Iraq, he wasn't intellectually aware of the ramifications of the Sunni-Shi'a divide.

AI: But again, it's not because the U.S. government doesn't know these things; it's because our leaders don't ask the questions, and it doesn't pay intelligence professionals anymore to work on issues no one demands to know about, no matter how important they may be.

ZB: That's right, and we may have had a National Security Advisor at the time who wasn't particularly curious about these things either, and worse, wasn't determined enough to compel the President to address the ramifications of this issue. After all, one of the jobs of the NSA is not just to coordinate the activities of the different agencies, but also to encourage the President to digest intelligently the available information from the intelligence community.

AI: Let's hope the next NSA understands that.

ZB: We can always hope.